



THE DISTRICT OF THUNDER BAY
SOCIAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION BOARD

MEDIA RELEASE

TBDSSAB Proposes Recommendations to Improve Social Assistance in Ontario

March 22, 2012 – For the second time in six months the District of Thunder Bay Social Services Administration Board (TBDSSAB) has taken the opportunity to suggest ways to fix what is broken in Ontario's social assistance system. To inform the work of the provincial *Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario*, TBDSSAB has provided recommendations on their second paper, *Approaches for Reform*, to ensure the realities of receiving social assistance in the District of Thunder Bay are reflected.

"It is valuable for the Commission to hear the perspectives of TBDSSAB staff, management and Board", said TBDSSAB Chair Bob Katajamaki. "That's why in addition to the public consultation hosted by our community partners, we felt it was important to conduct several focus groups with our staff and consult with our Board. Hearing the challenges and suggestions for change, from those who work in the social assistance system every day, should be tremendously informative for the Commission".

Analysis of the feedback collected in those sessions resulted in identified key issues and accompanying ideas on how to begin to improve social assistance in Ontario.

Some highlights include:

- Creation of an employment program, similar in design to federal and provincial summer student and internship programs, where recipients of Ontario Works have a placement opportunity with not-for-profit organizations where the subsidy covers 100% of the total cost of employment for a prescribed period of time;
- Address the fragmentation of services and address inefficiency by consolidating all employment services and income support to be delivered through a one-stop model that would integrate Ontario Works and ODSP in the District of Thunder Bay under the umbrella of the TBDSSAB;
- Provide extended health benefits, such as drugs and dental, outside the social assistance system to all low-income individuals;
- Calculating basic needs and shelter rates according to local market baskets for various communities, including basic telephone and transportation costs.

"Many of the issues included in our submission have previously been flagged as areas for advocacy by the Board," noted Katajamaki. "At the recent ROMA/OGRA conference we sat down with the Minister of Community and Social Services to highlight the distinct challenges faced by many families on social assistance in our District."

The Commission is expected to present their recommendations to the Ontario government in June 2012.

To review the full TBDSSAB submission, please visit our website at www.tbdssab.on.ca.

More information on the Social Assistance Review can be found at www.socialassistancereview.ca.

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TBDSSAB Submission to the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario

March 16th, 2012



THE DISTRICT OF THUNDER BAY
SOCIAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION BOARD

Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario: TBDSSAB Recommendations

Preface

The District of Thunder Bay Social Services Administration Board (TBDSSAB) applauds the efforts of the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario. We are once again pleased to have the opportunity to provide some insight into the experiences and ideas of our clients, staff, and community partners on ways to improve the social assistance system.

TBDSSAB was a partner in organizing the community-wide consultation that took place in Thunder Bay on March 6th, 2012. While this event generated valuable discussion, our community partners have captured that information and are submitting it to the Commission separately. As Service Manager, we felt it was important to ensure the experience and ideas of our staff and Board were leveraged to inform your work. The information that follows has been drawn from extensive focus groups with staff from Service System Planning, Client Services, and Specialized Client Services, as well as consultation with our Board members.

The results of these consultations have been distilled into “*Question*” and “*Response*” and correspond to the first 4 focus areas identified in *Discussion Paper 2: Approaches for Reform*. The following text includes feedback where there was at least some degree of consensus from the consultation groups. Issues raised that are based in local discretion have been documented separately and will be used to inform local planning going forward. Efforts have been made to focus on solutions rather than solely identifying problems, and it is hoped that these will provide a more robust consideration of the issues as the Commission carries out its mandate.

Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario: TBDSSAB Recommendations

1. Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports to Employment

QUESTION: How can employment services be made more effective?

RESPONSE

We heard in all our consultations a need to better assess the skills, goals, and challenges clients bring with them when they first apply for social assistance. Many workers felt they needed to have more time to get to know their clients, establish a trusting relationship, and begin to tease out the fundamental goals and barriers to employment of each client.

Employment services could be made much more effective if individuals are placed in meaningful employment opportunities that match their developed skill set and interests. It is felt that too often individuals are encouraged to accept any employment that becomes available leading to unsustainable situations.

To ensure we are connecting the right people with the right employers and supports, it is necessary to more accurately assess the client's current needs and readiness for change prior to pushing them down the road of employment. A more sensitive assessment process would screen for domains such as learning disabilities, mental health and addictions challenges, personality traits, individual life circumstances, life and career goals, and be clearly focused on highlighting the multiple strengths of each individual client.

Consultation participants also noted that we should adopt more flexible indicators of success for individuals on Ontario Works. Individuals with complex barriers to employment should be acknowledged and supported for showing incremental positive steps that are achieved.

In addition to employment, outcomes need to be expanded to include health, independence, education, and capability development. These outcomes should carry the same weight as an employment outcome in determining the success of the program, and should be built into the legislation. While employment should always be the ultimate goal of a program like Ontario Works, it cannot be the exclusive outcome if OW is to help people to be both healthy and self-sufficient.

To achieve these goals, TBDSSAB recommends sustained 100% provincial funding for employment placement workers and funding that ensures smaller caseloads to better support clients.

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QUESTION: What kinds of engagement strategies and incentives would be most effective in encouraging and supporting employers to hire more social assistance recipients?

RESPONSE

The ideas for engagement and incentives to encourage employers included offering a higher wage subsidy and slowly scaling back the subsidy over time. The primary concern with wage subsidy is that when this incentive ends, employment for the social assistance recipient often ends with it. By scaling this incentive back slowly, the employee would have a longer period of time to prove their value to the employer, therefore increasing the likelihood of sustained employment.

The TBDSSAB also recommends a separate employment placement program for not-for-profit organizations where the subsidy covers 100% of the total cost of employment for a prescribed period of time (i.e. one or two years). This approach would be similar to federal and provincial student and intern employment programs and would have high participation rates as not-for-profits would be more than willing to engage OW recipients in this way.

Another incentive approach discussed was the idea of a community-wide recognition campaign of employers who hire Ontario Works recipients. This may entice new employers to hire social assistance recipients to receive the positive public relations exposure and would demonstrate appreciation for the employers who are involved in hiring Ontario Works recipients.

Finally, it was suggested that more time must be taken to know our client and their skillset to ensure that there is the right match between the responsibilities of the job and the skills of the Ontario Works recipient. This will assist in minimizing negative experiences for the employer and help build a positive image of the placement program.

QUESTION: Which approach would be most effective in improving the delivery of employment services?

RESPONSE

The TBDSSAB fully supports the recommendation of the shift to one employment service delivery agent. It is felt that these employment services should be delivered at the local Service Manager (CMSM and DSSAB) level as natural linkages with housing; childcare, economic development and collaborative relationships with health already exist. Without a doubt, Service Managers are best positioned to wrap services around the client and implement a client centered approach that would include income support, childcare, and housing which are all fundamental for moving individuals toward employment.

The TBDSSAB feels that the unique barriers experienced by many recipients of our services are much more complex than Employment Ontario (EO) services have experience navigating.

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Ontario Works offers a much more holistic service not accounted for in the general EO programs.

2. Appropriate Benefit Structure

QUESTION: Which adequacy and wage benchmarks should be used to set rates? Are there other measures that should be considered?

RESPONSE

Calculate basic needs rates according to a market basket of locally-priced essential goods, including basic accommodation, telephone and transportation costs, and link this new rate to rise with inflation. Make these calculations transparent to the public. If raising shelter budgets to match the local market average would cause landlords to raise rents, provide a rent-supplement directly to households to bridge the gap between current shelter maximums and average market rents. Allow for the maximum shelter entitlement to be paid to social housing providers for RGI units occupied by social assistance recipients. As well, to better reflect the actual costs of living for remote communities not currently considered “northern”, either redefine “northern” under the regulations or base additional subsidy on the distance from the closest urban centre or the difference in average cost of a market basket from that of the closest urban centre.

QUESTION: Should Ontario use a two-rate approach, based on how long someone requires social assistance?

RESPONSE

Consultation participants agreed that Ontario Works is generally effective for individuals who have work experiences and skills to offer employers. For individuals with multiple barriers to employment, the current design of Ontario Works is not meeting their needs. They are not considered “disabled enough” to qualify for ODSP yet the employment focus of OW is not responding to their fundamental and more deeply rooted barriers, which in our experience are primarily addictions and undiagnosed and untreated mental health issues. These clients and their OW workers are caught between the inappropriate employment expectations of Ontario Works, and the paucity of community services and time to support these individuals in addressing these barriers to employment.

The TBDDSAB however, does not support the two-rate approach for those individuals experiencing barriers to employment. There are sound reasons for this conclusion. A two-rate approach has the very real potential to act as a disincentive for individuals in addressing their barriers to employment. In addition, the legislative purpose of Ontario Works is to provide temporary financial assistance to those most in need while they satisfy obligations to become

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and stay employed. Instead of a two-rate approach, it is recommended that ODSP be made more flexible to accept long-term clients of Ontario Works with barriers to employment.

The TBDSSAB recommends that after 12 consecutive months of collecting OW assistance, the client be assessed to determine whether significant barriers to employment exist. Our internal evidence suggests that clients exceeding 12 consecutive months of OW benefits exhibit barriers to successful and sustainable employment and remain on our caseload long-term.

The approach used for this recommendation should be modeled after the process used by WSIB where all cases are referred to a short-term case manager. If the client is still registered with WSIB after 180 days, the case is transferred to a long-term case manager who will then determine if the client should be referred for a NEL assessment. For Ontario Works, clients remaining on assistance for 365 days would be referred to a long-term case manager that would assess whether they could be further assisted through OW programs or would be better suited for an expanded and accessible ODSP benefit.

QUESTION: Should Ontario extend health benefits?

RESPONSE

It is the position of TBDSSAB that prescription drug, dental, and vision care, must be extended on a universal, income-tested basis to all low-income Ontarians, regardless of whether they are working or receiving social assistance.

To ensure social assistance recipients who transition to low-paying employment without benefits are reassured that their drug, dental and vision care expenses are met, provide such coverage to all low-income individuals outside the social assistance system. Cap eligibility for these extended benefits at a certain level of income sustained over a reasonable period of time so as not to limit individuals to low-wage, low-hour jobs.

To provide any benefits outside of social assistance to low-income households, the province needs to set an official poverty line that reflects local realities. How they calculate this income limit will need to be made public and be tied to inflation. Provide basic drug and preventative dental care to those households meeting this income limit and who do not receive salary in lieu of benefits from their employers. This will undoubtedly increase costs to the province but will remove a significant barrier for many to remain attached to the workforce in even entry-level positions, and will be offset by the additional tax revenue and economic stimulus this provides. One option would be to explore revamping the Trillium program to accommodate these costs, or subsidizing this cost through a small tax on non-salary income above the 95th percentile.

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QUESTION: Should Ontario implement a housing benefit?

RESPONSE

The suggested implementation of a housing benefit for all low-income Ontarians has the full support of the TBDSSAB. We believe that this benefit should be modeled after the new Investment in Affordable Housing (IAH) rent supplement program. This benefit should also be administered and fully funded by the Province as with previous rent supplement programs. The TBDSSAB does suggest that when a broad housing benefit is implemented that the Province takes appropriate steps to ensure that landlords are prevented from raising rents to profit from this initiative at the expense of those in receipt of the benefit.

QUESTION: How should the current rate structure be changed to reduce complexity? Should some special benefits be rolled into a standard rate? If so, which ones?

RESPONSE

There was a broad consensus that the amount of paper work and administrative requirements to access certain benefits or meet program requirements is excessive. Workers spend more time on managing rules than building relationships with clients.

The TBDSSAB supports the Commissions' suggestion for the basic needs component and shelter allowance to be combined into a standard rate for all adults. This would save costly administration time that is currently dedicated to verifying whether someone is paying less than the maximum rental amount. This time could be better spent assisting clients with other needs. This suggestion would also give OW recipients more flexibility in fiscal decision-making and would result in less intrusion into their lives.

Consultation participants noted the inconsistencies that currently exist in the administration of special benefits, such as the Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefit. This inconsistency espoused support for the idea of rolling special benefits into a standard rate. This standard rate should also include the costs of basic telephone and transportation, particularly in rural and remote communities without public transportation and needs to reflect the actual costs in the various regions across the Province.

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3. Easier to Understand

QUESTION: Should the social assistance system move from a surveillance approach toward an audit-based system of verification and monitoring?

RESPONSE

The TBDSSAB fully supports the rationale that the recommendation for an audit-based system of verification rests upon. However, many of the consultation participants felt that this would not be the best approach for transforming the system of verification and monitoring. Consultation participants shared that clients, particularly those with high support needs, have trouble with claiming properly. With an audit-based system, these reporting issues may snowball over a longer period of time. Consultation participants felt that an audit-based approach was setting many clients up to fail. Those clients with higher support needs may have difficulty keeping track of the requisite paperwork over a longer period of time. If audited, these clients may not be able to produce their paperwork to prove their earlier claims and would therefore be subject to penalty.

The TBDSSAB suggests that exception based income reporting would be a more appropriate recommendation. Exception based income reporting will meet the rationale set out by the Commission to reduce the amount of time spent on monthly administration. Exception based income reporting would apply to all Ontario Works recipients without income to report or those with static or fixed income. Monthly reporting requirements would continue for participants pending income; receiving fluctuating or variable income; and receiving earned income from employment.

QUESTION: Should asset limits be changed? If so, how?

RESPONSE

Asset restrictions cause people coming on to social assistance to become as poor as possible, making it more difficult to become and remain self-sufficient. Forcing households to liquidate virtually all assets before receiving social assistance is not compatible with a temporary support program.

For individuals who are highly employable and only on assistance for a short time, liquidating assets might make it more likely for those people to return repeatedly to social assistance. Older workers who have built some retirement savings are required to access those savings in most cases, increasing the likelihood of requiring support as a low-income senior.

The TBDSSAB supports the call for increased asset limits. Raise the asset limits to, at a minimum, match those set through ODSP. Provide a brief grace period, between 6 months to a year, for asset limits to take effect for individuals on assistance. Exempt RRSP and life

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insurance policies entirely. Make it easier for recipients in rural and remote communities to acquire/retain a vehicle where public transportation does not exist and provide an exemption for households with one vehicle worth over \$5,000.

4. Viable Over the Long Term

QUESTION: What are the strengths and weaknesses of the three approaches to the delivery of Ontario Works and ODSP? Are there other approaches that should be considered?

RESPONSE

The Commission offered three approaches to improving the integration of social assistance. The TBDSSAB supports the second approach outlined that would see employment services and income support delivered through a one-stop model that would integrate Ontario Works and ODSP at the local level. Our communities require local, responsive, client centered, and integrated client services. CMSM's and DSSAB's have the skills, experience, and expertise required to deliver an integrated social assistance program tailored to the needs of our communities. In addition, as DSSABs operate offices in a number of communities across the Districts, staff and infrastructure are readily available to assist clients. At present, Employment Ontario and ODSP do not have an existing presence in these communities leaving DSSABs as the logical choice for service delivery in these areas.